Experiences, challenges and the reasons I settled on Xubuntu

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Two years have passed since I first started trying Linux on my quest for a "secure solution." This was prompted by my tiring of reinstalling Microsoft Windows after being infected over and over again despite futile attempts to get the best antivirus protection available.

At that time I had absolutely no knowledge of Linux apart from its existence, I only heard the regular "command line rumours" leading me to believe Linux was only for people who felt comfortable using the command line. When I decided to take a more serious look, I sought out a person to whom I am thankful to this day who told me "Get Ubuntu." As I recall I didn't question their advice, went back home, googled for Ubuntu and downloaded a copy.

My first Ubuntu experience, I have to admit, was not what I would even imagine: a crash upon the first kernel update right after installation. One could conceive an event like this would affect my decision in using the system further. They would be correct. After a series of unsuccessful attempts to find the drawback I simply disabled updates and used the system until I found a suitable replacement in Linux Mint, an Ubuntu-based flavor which was more stable for me.

GNOME 2

Ubuntu's, as well as Linux Mint's default desktop was GNOME 2 at that time, which I wasn't very fond of from the beginning. Although I learned later it was community's number one choice, somehow I felt it was not for me. GNOME 2 was a true pioneer amongst desktop environments and very feature-rich. It offered what the Linux world is most known for, a near infinite set of variations in terms of customization. Even though I've been using Microsoft Windows for more than a decade, back then I was a complete newcomer to the Linux world, as I was unaware of the wide variety of options it offered. That, like everything else, changed over time.

Mint faded into the darkest corner of my mind soon after suffering from recurrent hardware issues, forcing me to look for a stable alternative that would support all my hardware, as an ideal operating system is supposed to. At this point I became what is known within the community as a "distro-hopper", i.e.

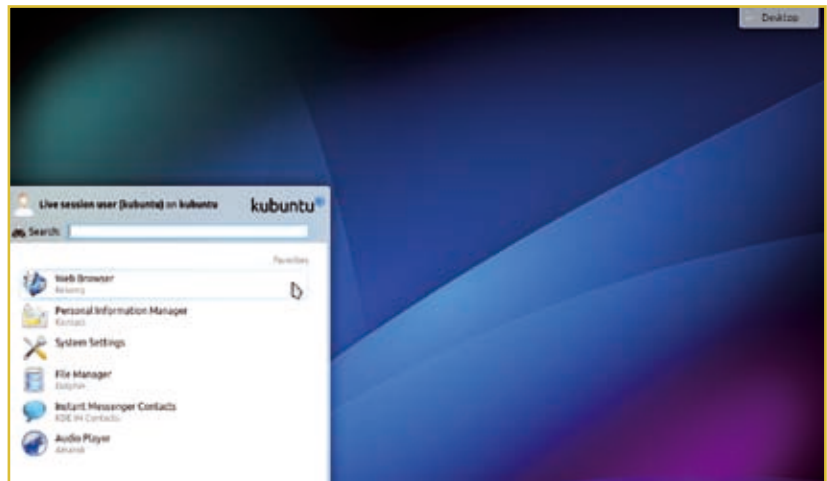**Figure 1.** *GNOME 2 on Ubuntu 10.04*

changing Linux distributions with different desktop environments on a regular basis, mostly for testing purposes and eventually settling with one. Fedora, openSUSE and other major Linux distributions followed and since I had problematic hardware I decided for neither of them. With Fedora in particular I found it cumbersome to overcome their installer, which, although was graphical, didn't seem to me to follow the fundamental guiding principles of user-friendliness. This was very much unlike with Ubuntu, which was, on the contrary, very user-friendly from the beginning and pretty much self-explanatory without redundant additions.

Ubuntu, with the strong backing from Canonical and a large community of contributors has led to improved and gained better hardware support. Another big thing that pulled me back to Ubuntu was its philosophy with focus on Unity, the core of all major human success. What makes Linux grow in success is the fact that innovations have the tendency to emerge practically anytime, out of nowhere and without major notice thanks to the involvement of the community, which stands behind the success of many great common efforts. Firefox, another open project, is another great example of these kinds of ideals and success.

KDE

KDE is a recognized effort from which many draw their inspiration, including Microsoft and Apple, both having adopted some of its key features.

It's a great example and proof to the statement "good both above and under the hood", as long as it's kept that way. KDE features the Plasma workspace, which is good looking, has great functionality, lays emphasis on customizability, but alas sacrifices computer resources and sometimes "too much is just too much" in my opinion. To me KDE always seemed too heavyweight, although many will disagree, and too many features are excess that bloat the system with possible

Figure 2. *KDE screenshot*

consequences such as eventually resulting in redundant overload and after a while what seemed very usable and pretty becomes very unusable. Not everything that glitters is gold and I'd add what *Linus Torvalds* once mentioned in one of his Google+ posts: "It's way too cartoonish."
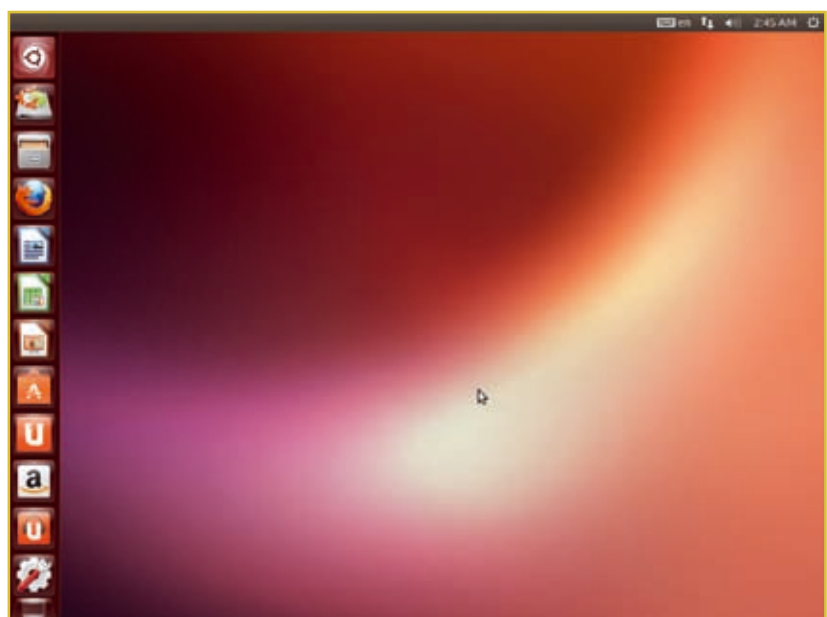
Unity

In my evaluation of Unity, I'll begin with a few basic, fundamental guiding principles:

■ Good habits die hard, or die last.
■ Less is always more.
■ Time is the best friend and advisor.
■ One goes further by walking instead of rushing things.

Unity is a great desktop with a lot of potential, it's goal is to simplify user's work on the computer, to ease the transition from another operating system, or make the acquaintance / first encounter as painless as possible. Regretfully I have to agree, that I don't feel Canonical has made the wisest decision when choosing a drastic change for what could be called a new start. I understand the concept of innovation and breakthrough, but at the same time it's true that rushing things never took us places, only made us

Figure 3. *Unity*

regret and left us exhausted pursuing something that could've be achieved otherwise.

You might ask why did I then install Unity in the first place? Well, simple, since Unity is Ubuntu's default desktop and main focus, it would logically receive most support. But the lack of support for many icons e.g. in the system tray, management of the tray and basic commands in the dash plus the chaotic alignment of icons in it, as I would call it, based on my own, personal experience and preference. I sometimes tend to get lost in the dash, got so many icons there and it's far from convenient, but one wants to keep everything at one place. The fact that launchers do not possess many basic right-click commands is quite frustrating and slows workflow down.

Unity, at the moment, is designed so that many of the basic functions it should possess from the start it would have integrated by third party applications that take too much space in the system tray and make the system overly bloated. Icons cannot be hidden and since all menus of all applications are shown in the panel as well, they tend to overlap, which I find very irritating. Also, there is no easy way for a regular user to customize / hide the top panel. In terms of customi-

zation, Unity is very limited, following a set of standards.

Other Desktop Environments

All of the major desktop environments (KDE, GNOME and Unity) are shipped with relatively good default configurations as well. This makes them suitable for novices and migrants from other operating systems.

Some of those which I did test include Enlightenment, Fluxbox, Openbox and other very minimalistic desktop. Generally, the most minimalistic desktops also required the most configuration and effort from the user. What made this even laborious was the fact that configuring the desktops sometimes was very far from trivial. In addition, some of the desktop lacked the aesthetics I was looking for.
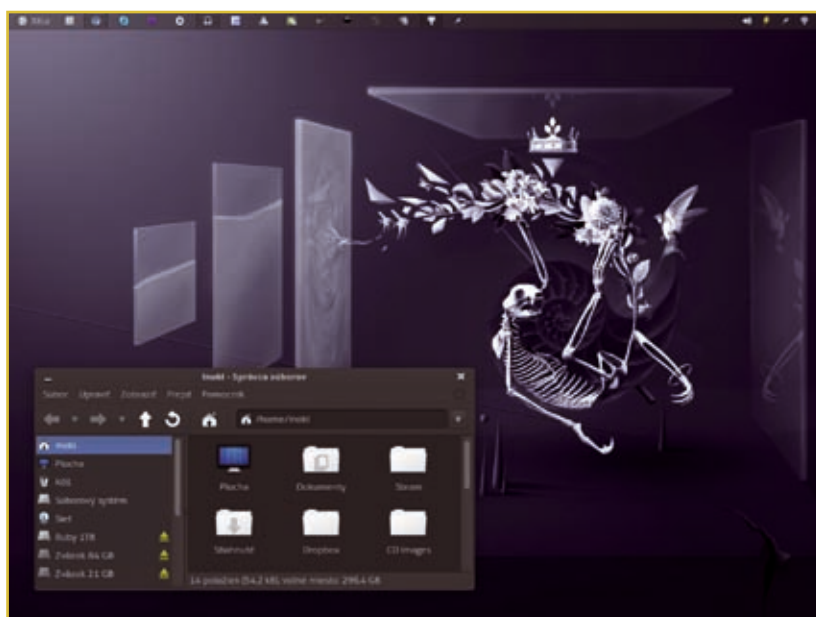
Xfce

Being a minimalist favoring traditional approach when it comes to computers, emphasizing usability and functionality over clutter, speed and efficiency over sluggishness, I must say I favor Xfce over other desktop environments I've used. I'd definitely say that Xfce is by far the most solid, stable and functional desktop out there.

Xfce's development is very

steady and there are no major diversions from the original philosophy, no drastic changes. Xfce gives the user full control over their system with minimal effort. It doesn't get in the way, is light, fast, responsive, simple and is, like Linux itself, exactly what we make it.

This is why I consider Xfce the best desktop of them all. Additionally it's available in Xubuntu, which is part of the Ubuntu family which I feel has the best philosophy of them all, driven by one the largest communities of them all, and backed by a large company. ■

Figure 4. *Inoki Sakaeru's Xubuntu desktop*